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AUTHOR	Kerka, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

Certain practices in volunteer development have proved successful to help organizations make the best use of their volunteers. Development should be a comprehensive, continuous process through which individuals can extend, update, and adapt their knowledge, skills, and abilities to enhance their performance and potential. A model for volunteer management and development is GEMS (Generate, Educate, Mobilize, Sustain). Discussion of volunteer development can be organized around the 4 steps and 18 phases of the spiral GEMS model, supplemented by United Kingdom standards and other sources. The first category, generate, includes identification of an organization's needs for volunteers that are then defined in written job descriptions; potential volunteers are identified, recruited, screened, and selected. The second category, educate, includes orienting volunteers to the organization and their jobs; protecting them from liability and risk with appropriate training; providing human, material, and information resources; and teaching, including initial and ongoing learning opportunities. Two other GEMS elements are mobilize (engage, motivate, supervise) and sustain (evaluate, recognize, retain, redirect, disengage). (18 references) (YLB)

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Volunteer Development
Practice Application Brief No. 26

Sandra Kerka

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Center on Education and Training for Employment
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The Ohio State University
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Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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Volunteer Development

by Sandra Kerka
2003

In the United States, 44 percent of adults (83.9 million people) volunteer, representing the equivalent of over 9 million full-time employees at a value of $239 billion (Independent Sector 2002). In many organizations, the work of volunteers plays an essential role in effective organizational performance, and thus their training and development are as important as that of paid staff. People volunteer and quit volunteering for a variety of reasons, but studies show that volunteer management and development play an important role. In a UPS Foundation (1999) survey, 40% of volunteers cited poor management practices as a reason for quitting. In a Canadian study (Phillips, Little, and Goodine 2002), the top three ways in which volunteers felt supported were organizational infrastructure, appreciation, and training; personal development ranked only slightly behind appreciation as the most important retention factor. Organizations such as 4-H, the Red Cross, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters have a comprehensive infrastructure and procedures for volunteer development. In smaller organizations, development of both paid and unpaid staff is a challenge. This Brief describes successful practices in volunteer development to help organizations make the best use of their volunteers.

The Development Process

Development should be a comprehensive, continuous process through which individuals can extend, update, and adapt their knowledge, skills, and abilities to enhance their performance and potential. It may include training—instruction in specific skills for particular tasks, but development has a broader, long-term focus. A comprehensive development program introduces volunteers to an organization's philosophy, mission, and activities; helps cultivate the "big picture" of service; provides a sense of individual strengths and needs; and prepares volunteers with the information and skills needed to perform their assignments (Bengels 1999; McKay et al. 1998). As volunteers continue working with an organization, a development plan will give them opportunities to acquire new skills and move to new assignments, which can prevent burnout, improve retention, and fulfill their need to make a difference (Bengels 1999; *Older People* 2001).

National standards for volunteer development were recommended at the V2K 2000 Conference (http://www.reeusda.gov/f4hn/v2k/Where_Do_We_Go.htm), but general standards have yet to be developed in the United States. National standards have been published by the Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation (VSNTO 2002) in the United Kingdom and by Volunteering Australia (2001). A number of models for volunteer management and development are used in the United States, particularly GEMS (Culp et al. 1999). The following discussion is organized around the 4 steps and 18 phases (noted in italics) of the spiral GEMS (**Generate, Educate, Mobilize, Sustain**) model, supplemented by the UK standards and other sources.

Generate

The first category includes identification of an *organization's needs* for volunteers, which are then defined in written *job descriptions*. Potential volunteers are *identified*, *recruited*, *screened*, and *selected* (Culp et al. 1999). Researchers who have constructed typologies of volunteer motivations report that understanding these multiple and varied motives provides keys to targeting recruitment strategies, selecting and matching volunteers to the right jobs, and identifying developmental needs (Clary et al. 1998; *Older People* 2001; Standerfer 2002). The Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al. 1998) is one tool that can be used during screening and selection to assess the relative importance of six motives: developing and enhancing one's career, enhancing personal development, engaging in social interaction, learning new skills and practicing underused abilities, coping with inner conflicts, and expressing values related to altruistic beliefs. Other research shows that motivations may change with time, frequency of volunteering, phase of volunteer career, age, life stage, ethnicity, gender, and employment status (Behnia and Bergin 2001; Clary et al. 1998; Hopkins 2000). These variables should be considered in preparing an ongoing development plan. Written job descriptions that clarify roles, responsibilities, and qualifications contribute to development when they are used for job matching, orientation, development of appropriate training, supervision, and feedback.

Educate

This category includes *orienting* volunteers to the organization and their jobs; *protecting* them from liability and risk with appropriate training; providing human, material, and informational *resources*; and *teaching*, including initial and ongoing learning opportunities that enable volunteers to perform their jobs (Culp et al. 1999). A volunteer development plan should include needs assessment, orientation, training, and evaluation, and volunteers, as adult learners, should be involved in planning. Needs assessments provide a baseline for planning future training priorities and needs by identifying the skills, knowledge, and attitudes volunteers have and need to fulfill their roles as well as their preferred learning styles (Crocoll 2001; McKay et al. 1998; VSNTO 2002). Crocoll provides a learning style assessment instrument and a needs assessment worksheet.

Orientation is an essential first step for new volunteers and should be revisited when volunteers switch roles or the organization makes substantial changes. During this phase, volunteers should receive information on organizational mission, policies, culture and norms, contacts, facilities and equipment, and procedures for supervision, reporting, and feedback. Much of this can be presented in a volunteer handbook, which might also address rights and responsibilities, rewards and recognition, reimbursement, liability risk management, safety and health issues, procedures for termination, and accessibility for volunteers with disabilities. The ***Handbook for Online Volunteers*** (http://www.serviceleader.org/vv/handbook/) addresses the needs of the growing numbers of virtual volunteers and can serve as a self-training tool. Handbooks and written material used for orientation can be learning tools when they are accurate, up to date, clearly and concisely presented, and appealing to verbal, visual, and other modalities (VSNTO 2002).

Volunteer learning may be incidental, informal, nonformal, or formal (Creyton 1999). Although the first two occur most often (ibid.), Serafino (2001) notes that the training offered is often formal, limited to initial skill development to satisfy role requirements, and focused on long-term, continuing traditional volunteering rather than short-term episodic service, which is becoming more common. Thus, a development plan should provide multiple, recursive opportunities to meet the ongoing needs of a wide spectrum of volunteers, who vary in age, ethnicity, motivation, and type of service. In addition to assignment-related knowledge and skills, training topics may include team building, leadership, working effectively in groups, diversity, and conflict mediation (Crocoll 2001; McKay et al. 1998).

Volunteer development should be based on adult learning principles: (1) recognizing adult learners' need to understand why they need to learn, their experiences that serve as learning resources, their readiness for and orientation to learning, and motivation; (2) varying approaches to fit different learning styles; (3) setting the physical and psychological climate; (4) involving learners in diagnosing needs, formulating objectives, designing and implementing learning plans, and evaluating learning; and (5) using experiential and collaborative learning activities (Bengels 1999; McKay et al. 1998). When training virtual volun-

teers, Ellis and Cravens (2000) suggest posting materials on the organization's website, providing audio or videotapes of volunteer meetings and workshops, and, if technological capacity allows, conducting interactive web-based training.

Mobilize and Sustain

Two other GEMS elements are Mobilize (*engage, motivate, supervise*) and Sustain (*evaluate, recognize, retain, redirect, disengage*). In the VSNTO (2002) standards, one element of engaging volunteers involves encouraging them to extend their roles. This provides another opportunity for continuing development, as new skill demands or changing interests and motivations suggest a need for additional training.

Evaluation of volunteer work is not uncontroversial. Although an organization needs to ensure that performance meets expectations, "formal assessment can be viewed as a failure to value and respect the gift" (Hopkins 2000, p. 11) and does not have the same implications as evaluation of paid staff. In some cases, such as hazardous, risky, or potentially litigious work done by volunteer firefighters or youth mentors, formal assessment is necessary to ensure competence. In any case, summative evaluation that becomes part of the development process should include self-assessments, feedback from paid staff working with volunteers, and volunteers' perceptions of satisfaction with the experience.

Evaluation is also a critical element in the growing trend of certification of volunteer training. National accrediting systems such as Britain's National Vocational Qualifications (Cox 2002) and Australia's Training Packages (Hopkins 2000) have been criticized for being too inflexible, complex, and time consuming to meet short-term volunteer training needs. There is mixed evidence that volunteers even want such formal recognition. They may be a recruitment and retention incentive for volunteers with career-related motivations. To those whose motives are personal, social, or altruistic, such extrinsic rewards are irrelevant.

Volunteer recognition can also contribute to development. Energize, Inc. gives examples of learning opportunities offered as volunteer rewards: museum/gallery tours and workshops, book or magazine subscriptions, a resume writing workshop (http://www.energizeinc.com/ideas/learning.html). Factors that contribute to volunteer retention include having chances for advancement/personal growth, and experiencing congruence between needs, interests, and responsibilities (Bengels 1999). Volunteers leave when there are discrepancies between their expectations and reality, tasks are routine and unvaried, and there are no opportunities to grow or demonstrate initiative (ibid.). Developmental strategies in retention include mentoring, coaching, retraining, or redirecting volunteers to new responsibilities.

Summary of Development Practices

1. Develop an inclusive organizational culture that values volunteers, both as individuals and for the work they do.
2. Identify volunteers' predominant motivators and provide appropriate learning activities matched to motivational needs, preferred learning styles and methods.
3. Provide necessary information, skills, and practice.
4. Ensure that what volunteers learn and what they do are congruent and provide opportunities to influence decisions and use their skills.
5. Structure learning to accommodate both short- and long-term commitment.
6. Ensure that development is based on adult learning principles and demonstrates awareness of diversity.
7. Recognize that service orientations and needs change over time and revisit the stages of the GEMS model on a recurring basis.

(Serafino 2001; Standerfer 2002)

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Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus OH 43210-1090

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